

Crossbows as Archery Equipment?

In its September-October 2010 newsletter, the North Dakota Bowhunters Association, a respected private, nonprofit organization, published an editorial and a position statement outlining the group's concerns regarding any future legislation or proclamation changes that would make crossbows legal equipment during the state's regular archery deer or pronghorn seasons.

Currently, crossbows are allowed for hunters with physical disabilities via special permit from the North Dakota Game and Fish Department director, and the state does not have any rules that restrict crossbow ownership or use for target shooting.

While over the last few years a half-dozen or more states have changed their laws to allow crossbows during regular archery seasons, the Game and Fish Department has received little input from hunters who support such a move in North Dakota. The overwhelming majority of input is from hunters who do not want to see any changes, either allowing crossbows during regular archery seasons, or even as legal equipment during the rifle season but not the archery season.

Some Crossbow Basics

Depending on the reference, crossbows were used as weapons well over 2,000 years ago, likely invented by the Chinese and eventually spreading throughout Asia and Europe. While many technological improvements have been made since then, the basic structure remains the same: a bow-like device mounted on some sort of stock that is held against the shoulder, with a triggering device releasing the arrow.

While its limbs are short compared to a compound or recurve bow, they are thicker and stronger and require much more effort to draw back the string. Many crossbows have a mechanical device to help the archer pull back the string and lock it into position. It is that very characteristic – a string that is pulled back and basically cocked, instead of physically held in place by the archer – that forms a major distinction between crossbows and regular bows, and which makes crossbows illegal for hunting except for those who have a special permit.

North Dakota's current definition of legal archery equipment is set by annual governor's proclamation. That is, the Game and Fish Department develops season dates, bag limits and manner and method of take, and forwards to the governor for final approval. Game

and Fish regulations state: "A bow must be pulled, held and released by hand. Any release aid may be used providing it is hand operated, the shooter supports the draw weight of the bow, and the release is not attached to any part of the bow other than at the bowstring."

While crossbows are not specifically mentioned, they are not legal because the shooter does not typically pull the string back by hand, does not support the draw weight of the bow, and releases the string via a device that is not part of, or attached directly to, the bowstring.

Other Crossbow Comparisons

Modern crossbows with a draw weight of 150 to 175 pounds release an arrow – or "bolt" as the crossbow arrow is called – at roughly the same speed as a modern compound bow with a draw weight of 60 or 70 pounds, in the range of 300 to 350 feet per second depending on the bow model.

Flight characteristics are also similar, with arrow drop approximately six inches at 20 yards and around 30 inches at 40 yards. Two major differences are that crossbows are aimed from the shoulder like firearms, and are typically topped with some version of magnifying scope.

(While most archery hunters use some type of bow-mounted aiming device, Game and Fish regulations do not allow telescopic or magnifying sights.)

Aiming from the shoulder, a process familiar to all firearms numbers, makes accurately shooting a crossbow a more easily learned skill than accurately shooting a regular bow. While skilled archers can hit targets just as



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well as a skilled crossbow shooter, learning to accurately shoot a crossbow is much less involved than learning to accurately shoot a compound bow.

Crossbows in Other States

Across the country, about 35 states currently prohibit use of crossbows during regular archery seasons. Wyoming and Nebraska are among the 15 states that do allow crossbows during regular archery seasons, while Minnesota, South Dakota, Iowa and Wisconsin have rules similar to North Dakota. Montana is among the states that permit their use during gun seasons but not archery seasons, and a few states allow hunters older than age 60 or 62 to use them during regular archery seasons.

Most states also allow hunters with disabilities to use crossbows during archery season. For instance, in 2009 the Game and Fish Department issued 40 temporary permits for use of crossbows, and 191 permanent permits. Overall, 1,660 people have a director's permit that, with medical verification, permanently allows use of crossbows during archery season.

The Case Against Crossbows

The North Dakota Bowhunters Association's official position on allowing crossbows in the regular archery season includes the following points:

- The present archery equipment restrictions are designed to present a greater challenge resulting in increased hunter days afield with a more limited harvest potential.
- A crossbow is a shoulder-fired device that is out of place in a season designed for more primitive equipment.
- Allowing crossbows would substantially increase the archery deer and pronghorn harvest, perhaps resulting in decreased licenses for all archery, muzzleloader and rifle deer and pronghorn hunters in the form of some type of "one-buck" license system.
- There is no evidence that allowing crossbows in regular archery seasons recruits any new hunters. It simply allows the same hunters to use a shoulder-fired piece of equipment that is less challenging than the equipment presently allowed in North Dakota.
- Since a crossbow is predrawn, shooting one does not involve the skill of drawing the bow undetected by game and physically holding it at draw until the arrow is released.

Equitable distribution of licenses is an issue the Game and Fish Department would likely need to address if crossbows were allowed and a significant number of hunters bought them and started hunting during the archery season over and above the current

level.

In 2009, North Dakota residents purchased a record 16,812 deer archery licenses – good for any deer, statewide. That's up from an average of about 10,500 per year in the 1990s. Bowhunter success rates the last five years averaged just under 39 percent.

If the number of participants in the archery season increases significantly, whether under current regulations or if crossbows are allowed, at some point Game and Fish managers will have to look at archery harvest in relation to overall harvest, and determine if changes in license allocation are necessary.

Alternatives might include some type of lottery for these licenses, either within units in the same way gun licenses are issued, or statewide licenses that have a cap on the number available. As outlined in the August-September 2010 issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*, another option for balancing harvest is a buck license system issued by drawing that could be used in any season, but a hunter could receive only one per year, while archery doe licenses would likely remain unlimited.

Given current or higher deer populations, archery licenses would have to increase perhaps by several thousand before any changes were warranted. However, if the statewide deer population were to decline significantly, even the current level of archery licenses might require some attention.

The Other Side

- Since crossbows have been around for nearly four millennia, they are no less primitive than a modern compound bow.
- In some other states, hunters using crossbows are not substantially more successful than archers using traditional bows. As an example, in Ohio in 2007-08, crossbow hunter success was about 30 percent, while hunters using traditional bows had a success rate of about 23 percent. North Dakota's archery success rate the last four years has averaged 38.9 percent.
- Because they are less physically demanding, crossbows would encourage more women, children and elderly hunters to take an interest in archery.
- Crossbows fall under the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration manufacturer's excise tax. Sales of new equipment would generate considerable federal aid opportunity for the Game and Fish Department.

What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an e-mail at ndgf@nd.gov; call us at (701) 328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.